



The opening review of our June issue explores the fascinating life and career of Herbert Ponting, the photographer on Captain Robert Falcon Scott's Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole. Ponting's travels in Japan during the Meiji period are likely to be of particular interest to readers and resulted in several photographic series and publications including his Japanese memoirs *In Lotus-Land Japan*.

Another captivating yet very different figure in Japanese culture is the *yamamba*, the mountain witch, part of a widely recognised "old woman in the woods" folklore. Reviewed in this issue is a new collective publication examining the history and representations of this female character in terms of gender, art and literature among other topics.

Two reviews in this issue focus on literary works recently translated into English. *An I-Novel* by Mizumura

Minae is a semi-autobiographical novel using fiction to negotiate issues of nationhood, language, and identity between Japan and the US. *The Decagon House Murders* by Ayatsuji Yukito is a murder mystery story which follows the universal conventions of this classic genre, while bringing to it a distinctively Japanese approach.

This issue ends with a review of a publication on Japanese wild food plants written by journalist Winifred Bird. From wild mountain and forest herbs to bamboo and seaweed, from Kyushu to Hokkaido, this guide offers detailed information on identification, preparation and recipes to discover and taste this part of the Japanese natural world.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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## Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Reviewers

Cameron Bassindale, Katie Croft, Laurence Green, Susan Meehan and Riyoko Shibe.

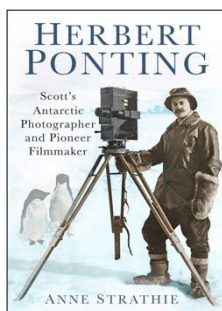
Image: A view of Fuji-san from a distance, across Lake Motosu, with kaia grass in foreground (Photograph by Herbert Ponting © A. Strathie).

## Herbert Ponting: Scott's Antarctic Photographer and Pioneer Filmmaker

by Anne Strathie

The History Press (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-0750979016

Review by Susan Meehan



Herbert Ponting, the photographer on Captain Robert Falcon Scott's Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole (1910 to 1913), is the fascinating subject of Anne Strathie's latest book, *Herbert Ponting: Scott's Antarctic Photographer and Pioneer Filmmaker*. This completes her Antarctic trilogy. The book was due out in 2020, the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ponting's birth but, as with many events planned for 2020, it was delayed because of Covid-19. The book is an unmatched account of Herbert Ponting's life, the result of meticulous research.

As Strathie says, 'Herbert Ponting created unparalleled visual records of Antarctica and of Scott's last expedition and great scientific endeavour, a legacy which alone guarantees his place in photographic and film history' (p. 207). Much less known, however, he also left behind thousands of evocative images of Japan, and three Japan-themed books. 'From the advent of photography in Japan until the end of the Meiji period, he is the best photographer to have worked in that country'. [1] In 1907 he was even awarded the Imperial Order of the Precious Crown (7<sup>th</sup> class), also bestowed on other journalists who had reported on the Russo-Japanese War.

It was rather magical and somewhat incongruous to imagine Ponting regaling Captain Scott and team (29 May 1911) with a magic lantern show of Japanese gardens, temples, hot springs, volcanoes, and geisha that he'd photographed during his many travels in Japan. Scott, thoroughly captivated, went on to borrow Ponting's recently published memoir, *In Lotus-Land Japan* (1910) (see the review of this book on Japan Society website). In 1922, Strathie also tells us, Ponting's friend, the artist Frank Beresford, gave a lantern slide lecture about his Japanese paintings to the Japan Society of London. Beresford supplemented his talk by also using some of Ponting's slides. It so happened that Ponting had just revised *In Lotus-Land Japan* and took the opportunity of Beresford's talk to present a copy to the Japan Society, another nice touch and connection for Japan Society members and enthusiasts.

Asked to describe Ponting, Strathie depicted him as an obsessive photographer, a great raconteur, a very good writer, incredibly hard working, someone who

could laugh at himself, and a complicated man.[2] She certainly brings to the fore all these aspects of Ponting in her punctiliously researched biography. As well as following in his footsteps, she undertook a serious amount of archive research, and managed to locate a vast amount of Ponting's scattered correspondence and many of his photographs.

Herbert Ponting was born in 1870, two years after the Meiji Restoration and 19 years after the Great Exhibition at which Queen Victoria discovered and was delighted by stereoscopic photographs. These were to entrance Ponting as well. Strathie is excellent at evoking the times Ponting lived in. He began work at a bank in the great port city of Liverpool in 1888, while living in Southport with his family. She mentions the increasing trade with Japan in the 1880s and Liverpool's importance as a trading and shipping hub. Liverpool was also a world of exhibitions and artists, and at that time, following the re-opening of Japan to trade in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese art and design had also become very popular. She also touches on the British craze for Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* from its emergence in 1885. Strathie really sets the scene for the future tug of Japan.

Ponting dreamt of going to the United States, which was the centre of photography, and in December 1892, with the financial support of his father, a well-regarded banker, he travelled by ship to post-Gold Rush California, settling near Auburn, a small town in the foothills of Sierra Nevada, California. Here he ran a fruit farm, married, had children, and seriously turned his attention to photography. Keen to realise his dream of becoming a "camera artist", as he liked to describe himself, he began submitting photos for competitions and exhibitions with considerable success.

His first significant break came in 1900, when he was commissioned by CH Graves, a stereoview company, and by the magazine *Leslie's Weekly* to travel to Asia. The stereoview company wanted to update its popular stereoviews of Japan, and the magazine wanted him to cover the Philippine-American War as well as the Boxer Rebellion in China.

Ponting felt in his element in Japan. A perfectionist himself, he appreciated the skill and perfectionism of the Japanese craftsmen he encountered, and he formed a very positive impression of the Japanese whom he regarded as extraordinarily polite, honest and very clean. He was also spellbound by Mount Fuji, which he photographed from every conceivable angle. The composition of Hiroshige's prints – almost like stage sets – were an inspiration for Ponting's stereoviews as were Hokusai's *A Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*.

Ponting would return to Asia and Japan many times during the first ten years of his career. Underwood and Underwood, the biggest stereoview company in the world, commissioned him to return to Japan to supplement their set of Japanese photographs. He also worked as correspondent for *Harper's Weekly*, covering the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, and went on to travel around Japan, India, China, Korea, Java, and Burma. A skilled cameraman, he became a regular contributor to *Graphic*, the *Illustrated London News*, *Pearson's* and *Strand Magazine*.

During 1905 and 1906, he collaborated with K Ogawa, a leading Japanese photographer, to lovingly produce his books *Fuji San*, which contained 25 views of Mount Fuji, and *Japanese Studies* – comprising 52 images accompanied by captions and poetry. Both books demonstrated his flair for narrative camerawork.

Between 1909 and 1910, Ponting was incredibly busy putting the finishing touches to his Japanese memoir, *In Lotus-Land Japan*, while also preparing for the 1910 Japan-British exhibition at White City, Shepherd's Bush, at which he exhibited many enlargements of his photographs. Mission accomplished, he then turned his attention to the "Great White South". A chance meeting led to Ponting being hired as the 1910 Terra Nova expedition's photographer. This was Captain Scott's second attempt to reach the South Pole.

On Antarctica, Ponting set up his own hut, complete with a dark room, and began sending the iconic photos of Scott and team, for which he is so well known, back to the UK. His images of Mount Erebus, the most southerly live volcano, and of Emperor penguin colonies, icebergs calving, and orcas presented a magnificent window onto the South Pole. After 14 months at Cape Evans, Antarctica, in February 1912 Ponting boarded the Terra Nova to sail back to the UK with more than 1,700 photographic plates. (Captain Scott would continue to the South Pole with a much reduced team of men. Strathie painstakingly tells the story of Scott's party and how they were pipped to the Pole by Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen and team).

Ponting went on to spend a large amount of time on the lecture circuit, giving cinema talks of his photographs and films of Antarctica, thereby keeping alive the memory of Scott and his Polar Team. Photographs and film from his voyage to Antarctica were shown in 1962, the 50th anniversary of Scott's arrival at the Pole. In 2012, during the Terra Nova expedition's centenary period, Ponting's work again became much sought after. It was featured on television programmes, in exhibitions, and in films reissued by the British Film Industry (BFI).

With little in the way of finances, all assiduously elucidated by Strathie, Ponting also had a go as an inventor, but with little success. He invented a small movie camera which he hoped would catch on, but Kodak outclassed him by bringing out a more versatile mini-projector and camera.

Strathie has done a wonderful job of bringing to our attention the life of this remarkable, restless, risk taking "camera artist" and lyrical writer. There is so much more detail to read in her masterful tome, especially with respect to his time in Antarctica, and also about the other, colourful Terra Nova expedition members. Strathie's book made me seek out Terra Nova expedition member, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's account, *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922) – the name says it all, and Beryl Bainbridge's gripping novel based on Scott's Polar Team, *The Birthday Boys* (1991).

While Strathie's book was delayed by a year, happily, a plaque to Herbert Ponting was unveiled in Salisbury (the city of his birth) during 2020. It is great to see that his memory and legacy is once again being celebrated.

#### Notes

[1] Bennett, Terry, "Photographers, Judo Masters & Journalists: Herbert George Ponting, 1870-1935", in *Japan Society's Biographical Portraits*, vol. IV, part 5, pp. 303-304.

[2] Talk by Anne Strathie for the Royal Photographic Society, Wednesday, 28 April 2021 on her book *Herbert Ponting: Scott's Antarctic Photographer and Pioneer Filmmaker*. [S](#)

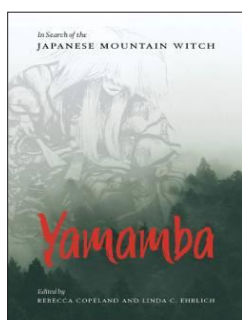
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## Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch

Edited by Rebecca Copeland and Linda C. Ehrlich

Stone Bridge Press (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-1611720662

Review by Riyoko Shibe



The Yamamba – the mountain witch, crone, or hag, part of the widely recognised "old woman in the

woods" folklore – can be traced back to the Muromachi period (1336-1573), a time of rapid population growth when merchants and villagers began to travel more frequently into the mountains. Solitary women who had moved to the mountains, driven by illness or in seek of solitude, became more visible to the wider population, inspiring stories of fear and hope as merchants met both helpful and hostile women during their travels. Tales emerged associating the Yamamba with fertility, nature, and temperamentality,

from devouring men, to endowing travellers with gifts, to birthing thousands of children at once.

Through creative writing and scholarly analysis, Rebecca Copeland and Linda C. Ehrlich's anthology examines mythologies around the Yamamba. Incorporating voices from Japan and the USA, the anthology shows how the Yamamba, 'less constrained by the tradition, customs, and social norms expected for a woman', reflects not just disgust and rejection of women who dismissed these expectations, but also shows how these women enacted agency in their rebellion of these norms. The Yamamba is thus located in old and new folktales, as well as in real-life manifestations such as in the *gyaru* subculture of the 1990s.

One example of the Yamamba explored in the anthology is the Noh play, *Yamamba*, written in the 1400s. Ann Sherif interviews the Noh performers Uzawa Hisa and Uzawa Hikaru, who bring the depth, physicality, and contradictions of the Yamamba to the fore. Hisa recalls during her lessons that she was taught 'that the yamamba embodies an unimaginable amount of energy... it should be like a mountain moving... The performer has to conceive of that level of strength and energy'.

Underlying the book is the notion that the Yamamba's sex must be "female", given her associations with fertility, her unconventional lifestyle and rejection of typical beauty, and connection with nature, delusion and attachment. Echoing this, Hisa reflects that 'if the yamamba were a man, it would be a very boring play... [lacking] in the scale or weight implicit in the demon role'.

In the interview, the discussion hints towards broader commentary on gender fluidity, adding a new dimension to discourse around the Yamamba's gender. Sherif probes the Noh performers on their viewpoints on twenty-first century perspectives on the topic, and they observe that performers of Yamamba do not perform her as a woman. Hisa states that 'what is important is where the energy comes from, not who the character is', and so, 'when we perform Yamamba, we don't think of it as performing woman ... The performer can't conceive of it that way'.

However, the discussion does not move beyond this, and the question remains: how *does* the Yamamba fit into twenty-first century – and historical – conceptions of gender? A complementary chapter would be welcome, perhaps exploring how the Yamamba's sex and gender have come to be understood, and how gender is challenged,

or reinforced, by these manifestations. Without such chapters examining themes brought up in interviews and short stories, the anthology remains slightly unbalanced, romanticising the Yamamba, her mythologies, and the discourses which surround her.

A similar critique can be made of Laura Miller's chapter, 'In A Yamamba's Shrinebox', which briefly touches on how the mythology manifested in the *kogyaru* or *gyaru* subculture and fashion trend of the 1990s. Young women who challenged mainstream beauty norms were nicknamed Yamamba for their appearance: they wore short skirts and bleached their hair, while their makeup consisted of bright eyeshadow and lipstick, with white paint around the eyes and mouth emphasising deep tans from tanning salons and creams. Thus, we learn that while Yamamba was used as an insult, the use of the word shows both how women rejected gender expectations by embracing alternative fashion and makeup trends, and also how they were rejected from society for this style, suffering abuse from men repulsed by their image.

Contention appears when Miller describes the process of fake tanning: emulating Black American culture, and also driven by their wish to reject Japanese beauty norms, *gyaru* darkened their skin through intensive tanning. The colourism and racism of this practice is not mentioned and appears to be actively sidestepped, with Miller translating the nickname derived from skin darkening, *ganguro*, as 'face black', rather than the more common translation of 'blackface'. With dark-skinned and/or mixed-race Japanese people suffering harassment and discrimination, darkening one's skin through a perverse appropriation of "coolness" can only be looked on critically. Failure to mention this context builds an uncritical, over-romanticisation of the Yamamba mythology, and also feels outdated given the plethora of literature and cultural commentary on the practice of blackface in *gyaru* culture.

A final critique would be David Holloway's short story on Aokigahara, suicide and the Yamamba. To K, a student in Japanese Studies, 'the Japanese just seemed comfortable with suicide', and inspired by 'the legacy of seppuku on the battlefields during the middle ages', K sets out to Aokigahara to kill himself, only to be saved, in some sort of way, by an encounter with the Yamamba. It is unclear what the story brings to the anthology beyond reinforcing outdated tropes tying suicide to a Japanese historical legacy and an innate Japanese sensibility. While it seems that links are being drawn with an ancient mythology and a newer

'flashpoint of curiosity and controversy', Aokigahara, the chapter nonetheless comes at odds to the other contributions, as the relevance of the Yamamba, aside from the general relationship with forests and nature, is unclear.

Without venturing beyond an introduction to the mythology itself, the anthology remains at a

slightly superficial level: more in-depth analysis could complement the interviews and creative writing pieces, while commentary could have included more references to wider literature on the subject. Despite this, the anthology is a creative exploration and rich introduction to key texts and artists exploring the Yamamba. §

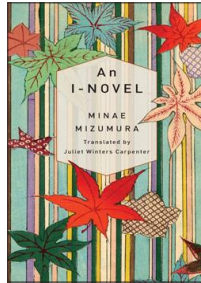
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## An I-Novel

by Mizumura Minae  
translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter

Columbia University Press (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-0231192132

Review by Laurence Green



*'I don't especially want to be an American, and you always wanted to stay Japanese much more than I did... In any case, you and I can never be Americans. We'll only be Japanese Americans... Or Asian Americans.'*

It is this negotiation between two ideas of nationhood, two concepts of 'belonging' - encompassing both language and identity - that lies at the heart of Mizumura Minae's *An I-Novel*. It is the book's full title, as presented in its Japanese original - *An I-Novel from Left to Right* - that reveals the conceptual framework at the heart of the piece. Unlike most Japanese novels, which are written from top-to-bottom, and right-to-left, Mizumura's semi-autobiographical piece, first published in Japan in 1995, instead reads from left-to-right, and blends Japanese script together with the English language, sometimes alternating even within the same sentence.

This, of course, presents an obvious challenge for the translator, but it is to Juliet Winters Carpenter's credit that this wholly English incarnation - where the 'original' English interjections are instead presented in bold typeface - maintains a remarkable consistency of tone throughout; seamless to the point of perfection. While the reading experience is of course transformed, and one might imagine never quite achieves the impact of a bilingual reader alternating between Japanese and English, the bold segments have a remarkable effect of ventriloquising the speech of the characters they represent. This lends the book, for much of its length, a striking Americanism - so much so that it often ceases to feel like Japanese literature. How much of this is Carpenter's remarkable translation and how much is present in Mizumura's original is hard to detect - but it all adds to a wholly encompassing force

of personality that warms you to the narrator with every passing page.

And what a narrative voice this novel packs. Ostensibly told over the course of a single day, we are presented the thoughts and communications of Mizumura's self-insert narrator Minae - a bookish Ivy League PhD student on the verge of completing her final oral examinations - as she converses with her sister Nanae - an aspiring artist - over the phone. The passage of time becomes elusive as we dip back into memories of the sisters' childhood; brought from Japan to New York in their teens due to their father's job transfer, they by necessity must quickly learn how to fit into an American high school education - an experience encompassing not just the obvious learning of a new language, but also a whole way of being, of inhabiting, a nation so different in custom and manner from their own.

Set as it is in the peak years of Japan's economic boom - the bubble years of the 1980s in which the country's economy saw it reigning supreme as part of a new global re-ordering of monetary power - many of the novel's most fascinating, amusing insights spin from the Mizumura family's status as part of Japan's wealthy elite translocated as expats to America. Here, their middle-to-upper class values must be negotiated as part of communities not quite sure how to place them - a world in which the status of migrancy and wealth still seem very much mutually exclusive. In conversations with their mother, the topic inevitably turns to marriage - or more specifically, marrying 'well'. Here, above all, money dominates. Elsewhere, they observe a Manhattan wracked by crime, homelessness and crumbling buildings. A fancy restaurant they visit in its midst seems like a paradisaical oasis in comparison. More widely, we are shown a world on the cusp of change - as Minae's account draws closer to the present day, she notes how chopsticks, once a curiously alien concept to most Americans, are already becoming a common, innocuous part of the background.

Their domineering mother becomes symbolic of a generation of parent-child relationships amongst Asian

expatriates in America; enrolling the two daughters in a gruelling regime of ballet and piano lessons. As the book notes biting at one point, speaking for all those whose youth resembled this experience; 'their mothers are living out their dreams through them'. The novel's obsession with class, while perhaps never overtly held up as a central theme as readily as language or race is, leads the book in moments to feel like a kind of 1980s Japanese take on E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. Hung as it is around the lives of two sisters - one scholarly and pensive, the other spirited and idealistic - the book's own dismantling of what it means to 'connect' in a foreign language and culture is so entrancing because its status as a thing of halves - both Japanese and American/English - allows it ultimately to speak to all with a singular clarity. This is the collective wisdom of two sisters who have inhabited both the physical and mental space of both nations responsible for forming who they are today, and as such can - with a withering eye for accuracy - nail home the merits and demerits of each.

The book's conclusion ultimately brings us full-circle, returning us to much of the imagery and snatches of lyricism presented in the opening pages. As the last of Minae's phone calls to her sister concludes and she comes to ponder again her choice to return to Japan after finishing her PhD, we are tipped once again into the book's most 'literary' moments. These sections - bookending the flashbacks that make up much of its middle movement - are arguably the densest, most

heavy-going of the novel. Emotionally charged, they lack some of the breezy simplicity that characterise Minae's recollections of her youth, but in hindsight offer a kind of catharsis - it is only in understanding the journey that Minae has taken to reach this point that the sheer need for her to write, to express herself in the written format and become a novelist, really hits us right in the heart.

*An I-Novel* is not the first of Mizumura's works to be released in English. A number of her other books - all also translated by Carpenter - have been previously released; chief among them *A True Novel* and *Inheritance From Mother*. In some ways, it is easy to imagine *An I-Novel* falling into the same easy space of quiet acclaim - cherished amongst fans, scholars and students of Japanese Literature and becoming a foundational text for future study. But truth be told, despite this new translated edition coming from an academic publisher, such is the exceptional quality of the prose, the easy confidence in which it lures in the reader, it really owes itself to broadening its audience beyond the readily converted. Just as contemporary female voices in Japanese literature such as Kawakami Mieko have slowly but steadily blazed a trail for impassioned literary encapsulations of womanhood, breaking down the walls between languages via concerted word of mouth, so too does the time feel right for Mizumura's extraordinary writing to strike home with the wider reading public. §

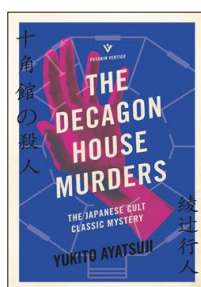
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## The Decagon House Murders

by Ayatsuji Yukito  
translated by Ho-Ling Wong

Pushkin Vertigo (2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-1782276340

Review by Cameron Bassindale



Despite revitalizing the classic murder mystery genre in Japan, and developing a cult following in the process, *The Decagon House Murders* is the first of Ayatsuji Yukito's works to be translated into English. This is surprising considering how steeped the novel is in the Western "whodunit" tradition. And yet, the world Ayatsuji crafts is also distinctly Japanese. The result is a lyrically woven natural setting, combined with the page-turning suspense emblematic of a quality murder mystery. This makes for a captivating read, culminating in an ending as satisfying as it is shocking.

First published in 1987, *The Decagon House Murders* had a huge part to play in revitalizing the honkaku, or orthodox sub-genre of murder mystery novels in Japan. Its place in the Japanese canon, with regards to mystery novels, cannot be understated. But from another perspective, the parallel between this novel and Agatha Christie's seminal work *And Then There Were None* is also made plainly obvious. Indeed, it is worth noting that Christie's novel was released under the title *Dead Island* (死人島) in Japan. What's more, mid-way through, a character makes explicit reference to the events unfolding being similar to Christie's novel; a clever postmodern move by Ayatsuji to remind the reader to approach the book as a mystery to be solved and not merely a story to be read.

The book opens with the inner thoughts of a deranged character, staring into a choppy sea hell-bent on passing 'Judgement'. From there, we follow seven students of the K- University Mystery Club as

they travel to the desolate island of Tsunojima, the sight of a gruesome murder-suicide six months earlier. Instantly, the cogs in the reader's mind begin to whir; the puzzle Ayatsuji has crafted is beginning to take form.

On the island, the group settle down into the Decagon House, designed by Nakamura Seiji who died in the brutal murders. The group, who go by names drawn from Western murder mystery greats such as 'Ellery', 'Carr' and 'Agatha', spend much of the first night exploring the ruins of a burned-down mansion that was the sight of the murders. In the Decagonal hall, they postulate on various theories, and generally get excited for a week of hypotheticals. These conversations serve Ayatsuji's purpose, which is chiefly to frame the events of the book not as a novel but as a puzzle. By and large the dialogue between the characters is instrumental, to aid the reader in their personal unravelling of the plot. At times, Ayatsuji could be accused of under-developing the personalities of the affectatious group of students. Clunky turns of phrases are not uncommon. However, what *The Decagon House Murders* lacks in convincing, engaging dialogue it makes up for in cerebral twists and turns.

As the group begin to recognize the danger they face, on the mainland former Mystery Club member Kawaminami (or 'Doyle') receives an ominous letter. Signed off by the deceased Nakamura Seiji accusing the club of murdering his daughter, this letter sets in motion a series of events that propel the plot forward at breakneck speed. From this point, the split narrative between Kawaminami's investigations on the mainland and the carnival of death on the island make

the reader ponder and doubt each development. This book's greatest asset then is in its structure. As the amateur sleuths on the island try to figure out which one amongst them is the murderer, and those on the mainland begin to unravel the grizzly past of the Nakamura's, the reader is left both clued up and mystified. Therein lies the genius of Ayatsuji's cult classic. Even with the benefit of a narrative structure that lets the reader in on far more information than any one character in the novel, you are unlikely to ever feel certain throughout the book that you know who did it. And if you do, chances are you will be proved wrong.

As the bodies begin to pile up, and the list of suspects shortens, a lesser mystery novel may struggle to hold the reader's imagination. In the latter stages, Ayatsuji really comes into his own. As the book builds towards its crescendo, the descriptions of the natural surroundings become poetic and ominous, in the tradition of the greatest Japanese literature. The use of pathetic fallacy as the book reaches its climax is expertly done, painting a vivid, brutal image. And then, the solution to the novel's puzzle unfolds in a way so ingenious and logical it can stand shoulder to shoulder with the very best mystery novels. If you wish to read a book that will grip, shock and engage you in equal measure then you need to look no further than *The Decagon House Murders*. As authors like Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana have given the British reading public a real taste for a certain type of Japanese fiction, the release of Ayatsuji Yukito's debut novel may signal the arrival of a new wave of Japanese mystery novels onto the British market. I believe the literary scene in this country would be all the better for it. §

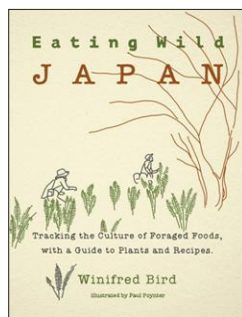
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## Eating Wild Japan: Tracking the Culture of Foraged Foods, with a Guide to Plants and Recipes

by Winifred Bird

Stone Bridge Press (2021)  
ISBN-13: 978-1611720617

Review by Katie Croft



Japanese experts to compile the first English language book on this topic.

Previously a journalist for the Japan Times, Bird became fascinated with wild forage plants whilst living in rural Japan. Her interest is in the culture of foraging as much as the food it supplies. As such, the connection between people and plants is prioritised in this book; whilst it gives clear practical guidance, it is not a field guide or reference text. Each of the five primary chapters tell the stories of a different plant or plant group: wild mountain and forest herbs; horse chestnut; bracken; bamboo and seaweed. This is followed by a guide to other common forage plants, which gives detailed information on identification, preparation and recipes. Bird gives some substitute

plants for readers outside Japan but unfortunately, most of those are North American rather than European natives. The final section of the book is a collection of recipes for all of the plants mentioned. For those of us that are more fluent in botanical Latin than Japanese, there is also a directory providing the Japanese, English and botanical names for common edible plants. This will be vital for many readers, as Bird primarily uses the Japanese names for plants. For those, like me, that are not familiar with more unusual plants like yomogi, oubayuri, hotokenoza, onigurumi, umizomen and so on, the liberal use of Japanese becomes a bit dizzying. I found myself frequently turning to google alongside the text, to make sure that I knew which plant I was reading about.

Bird spent three years travelling across Japan to meet the people that are still foraging for the plants in her five main chapters. Her journey took her from Kyushu to Hokkaido, and she writes evocatively of the wild places she discovers and the relics of traditional culture within them. Some of the plants and stories will be familiar to those with experience in Japanese cuisine but others are likely to be a surprise and I found that I was learning more about Japanese history than one would expect from a book about food.

Bird travels to Shiga prefecture to one of the few places where Japanese horse chestnuts (トチ, tochi) are still harvested and processed. In their fresh state, horse chestnuts (conkers) are highly toxic, in opposition to sweet chestnuts, which are familiar autumn fare in the west. It takes at least two weeks of processing to render tochi edible, after which they are used to make tochi-mochi, a rice/horse chestnut cake. Once a major food staple, there are now very few people that have the skills to process tochi and it is rare delicacy. A similar story is told of bracken (ワラビ, warabi). Young bracken fronds are a ubiquitous spring delicacy, but in Iwate prefecture it was common practice to make a calorie-rich starch from the roots until the mid-20th century, when industrial agriculture removed the need to search for food in the hills. As Bird explains, the cultural history of these plants mirrors Japan's cultural history and sociological changes.

Although this is a warm and inspirational book, Bird's underlying message has a haunting warning. As wild food's place in diet has changed from being a primary calorie source to a luxury addition, the quality, variety, sustainability and security of the nation's diet has decreased. As the skills and knowledge of foraging

have declined, so society's understanding and respect for the land around them has reduced. Bird argues that detachment from wild food – human's original food – is directly linked to the destruction of the natural environment and the resultant loss of local community and culture. Although she does not discuss it at length, this pattern feels all too familiar in the UK, where industrial agriculture, processed food and supermarkets have replaced our knowledge of local plants and connection with our natural landscape.

Bird writes with clear passion for plants and people and so these important environmental and social issues are lightened with optimism. She meets activists who have been saving horse chestnut trees from the axe, reinstating wild food culture and reviving the satoyama landscape. She also takes time to compare the history of foraging culture in mainland Japan with that of Hokkaido's native Ainu people, for whom wild food is still the heart of their culture. The lessons from the people she meets are that, although foraging culture and human knowledge of the natural environment is at a critical point, it is not too late. There is inspiration to be found here, whether you travel to Japan or not, to reconnect with the plants and food of your local area.

Despite the fact that the recipes are centred on wild foraged plants, I anticipate that UK residents would be able to make many of them by harvesting from the Japanese plants that are commonly grown in gardens. Bird includes dishes made from day lilies, the Japanese angelica tree (*Aralia elata*), Japanese spikenard (*Aralia cordata*), the royal fern (*Matteucia struthiopteris*), the ostrich fern (*Osmunda japonica*), and ginkgo. For anyone with a weedy garden, she also includes tips on preparing Japanese knotweed, mare's tail (*Equisetum arvense*) and bracken, which sounds like a much better method of control than a strimmer or glyphosate. Many of the leafy greens she uses could also be substituted with plantain, dandelion, wild garlic, chickweed and other readily available British plants. Due to time and seasonal restrictions, I have only been able to try one of the recipes detailed in the book: a version of tochi-mochi using sweet chestnuts as a replacement for their more difficult-to-source cousins. There are no photographs for the recipes so I can't tell you whether my rustic looking mochi turned out as they were supposed to, but they certainly tasted good. §